BLEST BE THE TIE
Philippians 2:1-7
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It was an exceptionally bitter labor-management dispute which had raged off and on for months. Neither side was budging. In fact, it seemed to me that each week the stakes got a little higher. When the strike began middle management people were locked in the plant; some were doing the minimum labor necessary to maintain an Aluminum Extruding Mill at operating capacity. It was Holy Week. Management and Labor people were in the congregation I served: even in church the tension was evident. On Maundy Thursday our custom was to observe communion in groups of forty - around tables, with the loaf and common cup passed along, person to person. The theme was the new fellowship of reconciliation created by our Lord at His Last Supper. It was all happenstance, I suppose: at one of the services I shall never forget, an Executive, who had left the plant for the express purpose of joining his family at church, found himself seated directly beside a vocal, active union man. As we served one another we said - "This is the body of Christ for you...This is the blood..." And at the end we passed the peace and greeted one another with the Right Hand of Fellowship - and some people even embraced. Management and Labor didn't embrace, but they did pass the peace, and give and receive bread and wine and afterward both made a point of seeing me to tell me that it was the most powerful communion either had experienced. Briefly something marvelous occurred. The strike went on and was resolved ultimately. Labor and Management went on blaming each other for all the ills of society in the adversary style each loves so much. One returned to the locked plant, the other to the picket line. But for one marvelous moment each was reminded, as were all of us privileged to witness it, that there is a relationship which transcends even a bitter strike. There are bonds of common humanity which are essential to our life. There is a way in which the love of God in Jesus Christ, energizes it, reveals it, calls it out of us, or - on occasion - reminds us how far we are from our own full humanity whenever it is absent.

Over the centuries the Christian church has called it by a funny name: The Communion of Saints. We nod in its direction on this Sunday of the church year, All Saints Day: we sing, or listen to, Ralph Vaughan Williams' great hymn, For All the Saints, and let it go at that. In the process, of course, we miss something the early Christian Church regarded as fundamental and central to the whole enterprise.

In the text this morning, Paul is writing to a group of people who had become very important to him - the church at Phillipi. He told them his gratitude for their support and prayer. It's obvious that he felt sustained by their love and he can't say enough about their kindness. In the process of all this affection Paul begins to isolate the essence of Christianity. Some would (and do) define it as right belief. Others regard it as a matter of moral behavior, duty. But emerging in the early writing of Paul is the acid test - the unity and love evident in the church itself. "Complete my joy," he pled; "have the same mind and love and be of one accord." And then some specifics: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

I have concluded that the Gospel of Jesus Christ confronts our culture as sharply in those several verses as anywhere else. I have concluded that Christian faith is absolutely revolutionary when it proposes as behavioral model - counting others better than oneself. The prevailing winds, after all, blow in the opposite direction. Self-assertion is fashionable, not self-abnegation.

In an article on the future of space travel Gerald Carr made some observations which caught my attention. Carr was the crew commander for the third and final Sky Lab mission and spent eighty-four days in space. Discussing the construction of space communities Carr observes, "Some major challenges will be to create closed ecological systems to sustain life aboard space stations and to develop a better understanding of the complex interpersonal and human issues living in space will present. I expect that the sociological problems will prove to be more difficult to solve than the technological ones." (The Futurist, October 1981, p.38).

Human relations experts have always known that, of course. Our technology is more precise, perhaps more advanced than our relational skills. The church may see itself as a Communion of Saints, metaphorically, at least, but the fact of the matter is that it's a jungle out there and St. Paul's advice notwithstanding, people who want to survive will concentrate on taking care of number one, developing self-sufficiency, learning so much self-esteem that self-assertion is simply the natural expression of one's inner self. The spirit of the time is expressed by a business established along Rt. 70, east of here, called "Survival". You can buy barbed wire and land mines to keep your neighbors out - bazooks and sub-machine guns to protect your family - that's the lunatic fringe, of course.

The cultural gospel is clear, however. Christopher Lasch called it the new Narcissism, and it is the very appealing and seductive doctrine Christians used to have the nerve to call sin. It is the simple and unapologetic celebration of the self. Henri Nouwen calls it "Nuclear Man" by which he means the self-contained individual capable of standing alone indefinitely, needing no one.

We have discounted the richness of a whole area of human relationships in our age described broadly under the category of friendship. Instead human relationships are confined to three levels: romantic/sexual - it occupies our attention almost obsessively: from Hollywood, to General Hospital; from best sellers to the eye catching headlines on supermarket counter tabloids, we do pay attention to romance and sex. It takes monumental self-discipline to keep your eyes on the bread.

And without any middle ground we proceed to functional relationships, business - that is to say. We learn how to manage, develop, plan, encourage, and squeeze utility out of the people with whom we deal. We attend seminars, workshops and buy an endless stream of books on the single topic of how to succeed in the business essentially by manipulating people.

Sex - business - and all the rest, say the relational experts, are relegated to the general category of acquaintances. We have, I was surprised to learn, between five hundred and twenty-five hundred acquaintances.

What is conspicuous by its absence in this breakdown of course, is friendship, or anything that remotely resembles the Communion of Saints. A remarkable and touching motion picture addressed the issue this year. Four Seasons was an account of friendship, as it lives and grows and changes in the relationship between three middle class, middle aged couples. It was a funny movie, a good movie. But the remarkable thing about it was that it touched a human dynamic, addressed an area which simply doesn't get much time elsewhere. Everyone who saw the movie seemed to realize it immediately.

Ellen Goodman, for instance, was inspired by the movie to write a column about friendship. "Friends," she wrote, "cook for each other, hold parties for each

other's birthdays, promotions, pregnancies. We spend dozens of Saturday nights together and occasional weekends. Our children call us by first names: we are remembered when they say prayers or sell raffle tickets."

"The movie," she wrote, "made a pitch for trying to stay together despite the centrifugal forces." (Columbus Citizne Journal).

Those forces are real. One of them is the cultural Gospel of selfishness. Sometimes we actually believe that we don't need anyone: that we are better off standing alone, dependent on no one. Another is the obvious situation of flux and dislocation in which life has placed many of us. Someone wrote recently that it wasn't long ago that you could "reach out and touch someone" without calling them long distance. You saw your relatives weekly, ate Sunday dinner with them, spent Saturday night together. Neighbors lived cheek-by-jowel for several generations. When I go home to Pennsylvania I knock on the doors of my neighborhood and say hello to the neighbors whom I knew thirty-five years ago. I've lived in my present home for 7-1/2 years and still haven't met the couple across the street.

The centrifugal forces are strong. And perhaps the best way to observe All Saints Day is to acknowledge and celebrate the marvelous gift of friendship wherever you experience it, or to take those initiatives which will create it. But there is more to it than celebrating the classic gift of friendship. The church, the early church, at least, saw itself, quite self-consciously, as the place where a new and richer and deeper level of human relationship would develop. The Christian Church, at its best, has known that its genius is something more than polite conviviality and cordiality. At its best it has discovered something like a Communion of Saints.

What a wonderful revelation that is for clergy who somehow get it in their heads that they are holding the church together on the sole strength of their brilliant theology, razor sharp exegesis and brave prophetic observation on the state of the world. What a revelation, finally, after several years in one's first parish, to comprehend the immense power of the Women's Bazaar and the Men's Spaghetti dinner and the Couples Hayride and the Golden Age Sewing Circle. What a major step in theological maturity it is to see the Communion of Saints emerging in the mundane affairs of "St. John's by-the-gas station".

The Wall Street Journal did a feature article on the church in suburbia several years ago which I clipped because it quoted some people I know. The pastor of a large suburban congregation reflected: "Nearly everyone who comes to us is in the midst of an adjustment crisis...The wives have no friends, the husbands have new jobs and the kids are changing school. They're hungry for instant intimacy, and we try to give it to them." In the same article, a Professor at Chicago Theological Seminary observed that "The Church is about the only family group open to everyone in suburbia." (Wall Street Journal, 10/27/77).

We don't often see ourselves in these terms. Particularly in an urban setting, with more stability than the suburbs, we are inclined to forget that we are, essentially, fundamentally, a group of individuals who are related to one another in a new way because of Jesus Christ. We forget, that is to say, the horizontal dimension of the faith. At the center of Presbyterian worship is a way of communion which says, in its very form, that we belong to one another, and that our relationship with God has everything in the world to do with our relationship with one another.

Robert Raines caught the essence of this Christian secret in one of his early

books entitled "Reshaping the Christian Life". I recall reading it at the very moment I was discovering its truth in the little church I was serving. Raines wrote: "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other...We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers and sisters we may like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us and we to them. Because we are involved with Him we are involved with them. And the reverse is also true. Through them we move closer to Him. We might wish to avoid this horizontal belonging and cling only to Him. But we cannot do so. We belong to Christ only by belonging to one another." (p.17).

The secret is that Jesus Christ is appropriated and interpreted and revealed to us through other people. We keep waiting for the mystical, ecstatic experience, the opening of the heavens and the literal descent of the Spirit, or at least a voice from the sky. But Jesus Christ will come through another person. It is in relationship: in kindness, thoughtfulness, loyalty, self-sacrifice, consideration that the reality of God himself will be known. That is the promise and the experience of the church.

And it is the discipline which commends itself to any person who wishes to grow and deepen in faith. We assume, almost naturally, that the pilgrimage involves traveling alone, into the inner spaces of the heart. We assume that growing in discipleship means reading the Bible and praying more. It does - but fundamentally what it means is reaching out, joining the company, taking a place in the Communion of Saints.

Disciplines of the spirit include praying but also listening to others, being available to people whose needs are evident; taking care of those God gives us and then extending that care to a wider circle. Spiritual discipline means private prayer but also opening the door of life to the stranger, the outcast, the reject, the friendless. Spiritual growth is measured - not in hours spent in worship - but in lives loved, helped, healed, reconciled. "The grace of God," Karl Barth wrote, "is that He encounters us as the listening God: He calls us not merely to the humility of the servant and the thankfulness of a child, but to the intimacy and boldness of a friend." (See Juergan Moltmann, <u>The Church in the Life of the Spirit</u>, p.118).

The incarnation of God happened in the life of Jesus Christ. It happens also in the life of the world, when Christian people become a Communion of Saints, a community of people who unapologetically love, accept, and trust one another.

That's what we have to offer the world. It is also what God has to offer us. And if it happens at all, it will happen here - in the life, the activities, the mundane affairs of this particular Communion of Saints. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. "

Amen.

Teach us to love, our Father, as You have loved us. Keep us in unity with those who have gone before - our Saints. And grant us strength to love those You have given us now. Grant us to be the Communion of Saints in which others will see Your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.